



The Power of Painting: Lessons Learned Behind Bars

November 20, 2014

You may remember a story we brought you about the Richard L. Owens Hospice Home in Peoria.

There, patients can pick pieces of art for their room that speak to them and help take the focus off of their terminal condition.

Each painting has a story to tell and so does the person behind them.

"The detail is so beautiful and I find it very uplifting the colors are rich and dark , but it's not depressing, to me it's a place to escape," says Donna Medina.

Taking care of people is Medina's passion. She planned the building of the hospice home, every detail, down to the paintings on the walls.

What she didn't plan was how she got them.

"In his letter, he told me, this is how the Chinese originally developed paints and made colors and said if I don't have paints. This is what I can do."

She's referencing a painting hanging in her office. The artist used taster's choice coffee, Kool-Aid, pencils, and ink pens to do that painting.

"I admired it so much and he said, what about something for the hospice home," explains Medina.

That's how it started. One painting turned into dozens. Each one, different.

Donna met Demetrius Henderson at a prison ministry retreat in 2008 at the Galesburg Correctional Center. She heard the testimony I gave about my life," explains Henderson.

"Now, we've been corresponding for five years. I have over 4,000 letters from Demetrius," says Medina.

"He's the same age as my son."

"In 1986, I was taken in for questioning for murder, kidnap, and sexual assault along with three other guys. After questioning, I was charged with the crime," Henderson explains.

Demetrius is now serving life in prison. We talked to him at the southern Illinois, Menard Correctional Center, where he was transferred. Life there is all about routine. Painting is somewhat of a release, some relief, from the past,

"I sit on the bed Indian style with the canvas on my lap with headphones in, listening to music. I just zone out and paint," Henderson explains.

When asked if he feels like painting, writing, does it help get through the days...
"I wanna say yes." He says. "But there is no escaping this reality. Painting offers you another avenue to help other people.

"To be part of something the conviction prevents you from being. But you can't escape this. This is life. This is real. And when I leave here, I have to go back to a cell. I have to wait on mail and write letters. It's not a cake walk. Nothing, nothing can prepare you for jail. Nothing."

But his relationship with Donna, and her family, has prepared him to see past himself.

"To understand that it's a bigger world out than just here, to understand that people have an everyday life," Henderson explains. "That people have responsibilities and it changed me because she was comfortable enough to invite me into her circle and family and embrace me."

It's turned into helping him serve in a world he hasn't seen for 30 years.

In a way, through art, Demetrius has taken on Donna's passion as his own. And, even from behind bars, they've both ended up in places neither one of them ever expected.

"I had blinders on before," says Medina. "And there's so much out there to be compassionate about and to care about. We live on our own world and don't always see that world that other people live in."

"I love it," explains Henderson. "I love it that I can be a part of something that's not about me. Something that's greater."

Demetrius was first sentenced to death, but then Governor Ryan commuted the death sentence in 2003. He's maintained his innocence ever since his conviction and hopes DNA evidence will reverse it one day.